



Quarterly Report April – June 2016

IRTOUN “Rise Again”

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)
and
USAID / Food For Peace (FFP)



Program activities in Ansongo Circle (Photo: Mercy Corps)

1. Executive Summary

With the support of USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and Food for Peace (FFP), Mercy Corps' Irtoun program offers a package of integrated activities designed to enhance food security and economic resilience of communities recovering from the effects of conflict in Ansongo, Northern Mali. In the third quarter of FY16, the program is on track to meet or exceed its objectives per its implementation plan. Mercy Corps continues to coordinate with local stakeholders and technical agencies of the government of Mali to ensure that the program is in line with local needs and helping to facilitate a clear path for recovery.

During the reporting period, the program achieved the following:

- Support for nine targeted vegetable producer associations to undertake off-season vegetable production activities;
- Refresher training for 150 young entrepreneurs on management of their small businesses and provision of a business scaling grant;
- Support to 22 Community Animal Health Workers to acquire kits for primary medical services
- Distribution of animal feed vouchers to 800 agro-pastoralists to meet two months of animal food needs;
- Monitoring of VSLA groups and village agents in the four target communes; and
- Dissemination of radio messages in local languages (Songai, Peuhl, Tamachec, Arabic) as part of popular education campaigns on the production and conservation of animal fodder.

Table 1. Award-Level Beneficiaries¹

Total beneficiaries targeted	25 060 beneficiaries (3 580 households)
Total beneficiaries reached this quarter	36 869 beneficiaries ¹ (5 267 households)
Total cumulative number of beneficiaries reached	66 269 beneficiaries ¹ (9 467 households)

<u>Sector #1</u> Agriculture & Food Security	Objective 1: Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods
Beneficiaries Targeted	8 400 beneficiaries (1 200 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	17 136 beneficiaries (2 448 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	45 052 beneficiaries ¹ (6 436 households)
<u>Sector #2</u> Economic Recovery & Market Systems	Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks
Beneficiaries Targeted	19 803 beneficiaries (2 829 households)
Beneficiaries Reached this quarter	19 803 beneficiaries (2 829 households)
Cumulative number of Beneficiaries Reached	21 217 beneficiaries (3 031 households)

2. Program Overview

In response to an extended period of conflict and drought in northern Mali, Mercy Corps designed the Irtoun program to enhance food security and economic recovery in Ansongo by strengthening agricultural production, helping vulnerable families protect their animal assets, and restoring livelihoods while building longer term economic resilience.

The objectives of the program are:

1. To help vulnerable households in the Ansongo circle recover productive agro-pastoral livelihoods, and

¹ Please note: Total beneficiary numbers are a count of direct and indirect beneficiaries (household members) that also benefit from activities undertaken by direct beneficiaries. Indirect beneficiaries are estimated based on average figures for household size, and beneficiary counting discount has been applied to total number of beneficiaries as mid-term evaluation found that 13% of beneficiaries participate in two program components and 3% of beneficiaries participate in three program components.

2. To allow vulnerable households to restore income-generating activities and withstand economic shocks.

Immediate food security needs are being addressed through food vouchers-for-work (VfW) as well as animal feed vouchers, acknowledging the importance of livestock as a food resource among agro-pastoral households in the region. Through a market-based approach, Irtoun also facilitates the recovery of market gardening activities, including the most important cash crops of the region, and addresses the needs of pastoralists for improved fodder and health care services for their livestock. VfW projects support the recovery of livelihoods by helping communities to rehabilitate lands, irrigation systems and agricultural infrastructure degraded during the conflict. Additionally, Irtoun assists micro-entrepreneurs affected by insecurity through business training and a small cash injection to re-start their businesses. Finally, all Irtoun beneficiaries are encouraged to join community based village savings and loan associations (VSLA), which act as a form of safety net to strengthen recovery efforts, allowing participants to benefit from improved financial management and credit opportunities for community driven economic growth. By intervening and supporting in key areas of agricultural and economic livelihood development, Irtoun is providing essential ingredients for communities to solidify a peaceful and productive future.

3. Contextual Update

For farmers, the vegetable gardening campaign reached an end with the final harvest of lettuce, tomato, and carrots, and certain farmers launched off-season production campaigns. Markets are well stocked with cereals and vegetables, though prices continue to increase as the lean season continues. The onion (species Galmi Violet), which is cultivated as a cash crop, is available in abundance on the market, which has caused the price per kilogram to drop to 75-100 FCFA.

For pastoralists, the animal health situation is stable, even though animals have begun to lose weight due to the lean season. As a result, prices for animals are on the decline. Animals are gathered in pastures in the fluvial zones, within a 40 km radius of the valley. Pastures are beginning to degrade in quality, and the security situation has made access to pastures difficult across the zone. Animals have begun to enter bourgou production areas in the valley, which will only support animals for one additional month. Bourgou producers continue their production cycle, and are undertaking harvest, stocking and commercialization of bourgou. Currently, bourgou is available on the market and the sales price varies between 750 and 1,000 FCFA per bale.

The food security situation is declining as the lean season continues. According to the latest report of the food security commission, vulnerable households were in need of assistance beginning in the month of May, as household food stocks have largely been exhausted.

The implementation of the peace accord is underway, and during the quarter, a meeting of the Monitoring Committee was held in Bamako with the main parties to the accord. The installation of interim authorities has been the principal event to take place over the past quarter. This process is already receiving vocal opposition from communities in the North, who oppose the non-representative and non-participatory nature of the selection and installation of these authorities. This discontentment was most notably seen in Gao in July 2016, when a youth protest against the interim authorities was met with force by the Malian military, leaving three youth dead and many injured. There has been an increase in discontent among the opposition in regards to the way in which the government is managing state affairs, with several protests planned to display opposition to the current status quo.

The security situation over the past trimester deteriorated significantly, with the number of armed attacks increasing in comparison to the previous trimester. A few examples of these attacks includes:

- Armed clashes between self-defense groups COMPIA15 and Gandakoye in Gao;
- Shelling of military camps (FAMA, Barkhane and MINUSMA) in Ansongo;
- IED explosions along roadways in the northern regions, causing the loss of human lives, particularly military;
- Attack against the FAMA position at the Tassiga bridge;
- Armed robberies along the roadways between Ansongo - Labbézanga and Ansongo - Ménaka which caused loss of life, theft of money and of valuable goods; and

- Targeted attacks against high-ranking FAMA officers, which resulted in the death of two senior officers.

4. Performance Summary

Sector #1 Agriculture & Food Security	Vulnerable households in Ansongo circle recover productive agricultural livelihoods			
Beneficiaries Targeted	24 010 beneficiaries (3 430 households)	Budget:	\$ 1 375 056	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 17 136 beneficiaries (2 448 households)	Cumulative: 45 052 beneficiaries ² (6 436 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Bourra, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 1.1: Livestock				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.1.1: Number of animals benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	2 000	20 971	May 2016
Indicator 1.1.2: Number of people benefiting from livestock activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	490	3 254	May 2016
	Female: 0	510	559	May 2016
Sub-Sector 1.2 : Improving Agricultural Production				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 1.2.1: Projected increase in number of months of food self-sufficiency due to distributed seed systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households ³	N/A	10 months	8.1 months	In progress
# Of community workers trained / refreshed, by sex and age	0	30	44	November 2015
# people benefiting from VFW activities, by sex and age	0	1 200	1 250	May 2016
Indicator 1.2.2. Number of people benefiting from seed systems/agricultural input activities, by sex	Male: 0	240	377	May 2016
	Female: 0	960	952	May 2016
Sector #2 Economic Recovery & Market Systems	Objective 2: Vulnerable households restore livelihoods and withstand economic shocks			

² Indirect beneficiaries are estimated due to unknown figures for household sizes.

³ The Months of Adequate Household Food Provisioning (MAHFP) measurement tool has been used for this indicator.

Beneficiaries Targeted	12 250 beneficiaries (1 750 households)	Budget:	\$ 354 819	
Beneficiaries Reached	Reporting period: 19 803 beneficiaries (2 829 households)	Cumulative: 21 217 beneficiaries (3 031 households)		
Geographic Area(s)	Gao Region of Northern Mali, Ansongo circle; Boura, Ouattagouna, Ansongo, Bara Communes			
Sub-Sector 2.1: Livelihoods Restoration				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.1.1: Number of people assisted through livelihoods restoration activities, disaggregated by sex	Male: 0	60	83	April 2016
	Female: 0	90	93	April 2016
Indicator 2.1.2: Percent of beneficiaries reporting their livelihoods restored within three to six months after receiving support	N/A	80%	N/A	
Indicator 2.1.3: Total USD amount channeled into the program area through sub-sector activities	\$0	\$15 000	\$34 067	In progress
Sub-Sector 2.2 : Microfinance				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Indicator 2.2.1: Number of people, disaggregated by sex, or MSEs newly receiving financial services or continuing to receive financial services due to USAID/OFDA support systems/agricultural inputs for beneficiary households	Male: 0	600	845	In progress
	Female: 0	1 000	2 010	In progress
Indicator 2.2.2: Percentage of financial services accounts/groups supported by USAID/OFDA that are functioning properly	N/A	75%	98%	In progress

Sector Summary:

Sector #1: Agriculture & Food Security:

1.1 Livestock

1.1.1 Animal fodder vouchers for vulnerable households.

Within the four target communes, 800 pastoralist and agro-pastoralist households (742 men and 58 women) received vouchers for the purchase of animal feed. The high percentage of men who benefitted is explained by the fact that, culturally, the responsibility for raising animals falls to the man within the household, even if the woman is responsible for the daily upkeep of animals within the household. During this lean season, where it is difficult to access animal feed and pastures are not available, animal feeding is strictly the responsibility of the man. In the case where the woman is the owner of the herd, it is still her husband or male relative who is responsible for feeding the herd.

Prior to the distribution, as in previous voucher distributions, the teams began with the selection and training of feed suppliers on the procedures for exchange and reimbursement of the vouchers, followed by the signature of a service contract between Mercy Corps and the vendors. In total, six vendors who corresponded to the selection criteria participated in the sale of animal feed to program beneficiaries.

In order to enhance sustainable access to animal feed and increase community autonomy, Mercy Corps teams initiated the installation of committees for the management of community animal feed stocks. These committees were created within each village, with the objective of ensuring transparent management of community funds, which will be established soon after the distribution of the animal feed. These funds are composed of savings of community members, and will enable communities to plan and respond to fodder shortages at the community level. The selection criteria for committee members were, among others: to be available for the required tasks, to have a good sense of cooperative activities and management, and to be literate (for certain posts of responsibility, such as the administrative secretary and treasurer). Through this process, 45 village committees were established, comprised of 168 members of which 158 men and 10 women.



Photo : Project beneficiaries receive fodder vouchers in Bazi Haoussa, Ansongo Commune

1.1.2 Capacity building of herders to improve fodder harvesting and storage

As during past quarters, community sensitization activities on techniques for cutting, storing and conserving fodder were conducted in the four communes targeted by the program. These sensitizations focused primarily on the following topics:

- Techniques for storage and conservation of fodder;
- Refresher training on the cutting and storage of bourgou (hippo grass) for those communities with access to bourgou growing areas; and
- Dissemination of radio messages in local languages (Sonrai, Peuhl, Tamasheq, Arabic) for mass education campaigns in partnership with community radios on good practices for cutting, storage and conservation of fodder. The messages emphasized the importance of planning ahead for fodder needs and conserving fodder in anticipation of household needs, in order to prepare households to address fodder needs during the lean season.

1.1.2 Training and refresher training for 30 Community Animal Health Workers

Item	Quantity	Total Cost (FCFA)
Sack	1	15 000
Syringe 20 cc	1	7 500
Disto 05	02 boxes	20 000
Albendazol 2500	02 boxes	15 000
Albendazol 300	02 boxes	11 400
Bolivit	50 capsules	15 000
Methylene Blue	01 box	5 000
Streze	01 tube	5 000
Olivitassol	10 sachets	2 500
Needles UM	12 boxes	1 800
Sub-dural needles	12 boxes	1 800

TOTAL**100 000**

Following the training of 22 community animal health workers on basic accounting and marketing principles, participants were provided with veterinary kits worth a total value of 100 000 FCFA (\$170). This activity was undertaken in close coordination with the state veterinarian and the state extension services who are active in supporting animal health.

Providing the CAHWs with basic veterinary materials will enable them to be more independent in their provision of basic medical services within their sites and will enable them to generate additional revenue in addition to the cases assigned by the state-mandated veterinarians. In turn, this activity will help ensure that animal health services are available in close proximity to the local population. The contents of the kit provided to the CAHWs is detailed in the table.

1.2 Improving Agricultural Production

1.2.1 Voucher for Agricultural inputs for 1,200 farmers

No activities to report during this quarter.

1.2.2 Training and support to 50 agricultural/gardening groups

During the quarter, several of the gardening groups which have access to a water point in proximity to their field took the initiative to undertake off-season production, beginning just after the harvest of the normal vegetable season. The plots planted were relatively small given that production during the hot and dry season is more risky. Despite this, with regular monitoring and care it is possible to produce certain crops which are resistant to the climatic conditions, and Mercy Corps' agriculture advisors accompanied the groups who chose to pursue off-season production with advice and support, so that these groups can serve as an example and inspiration for other groups. In total, almost 9ha were cultivated during the off-season by 9 agricultural associations, primarily targeting potatoes, onion, lettuce, cabbage, okra, cow peas and cassava.



*Off-Season potato production in Yiriwa – Ansongo
(Photo: Mercy Corps)*

During the month of June, the harvest had already begun at all of the sites. The production is largely intended for the consumption of the association members, which enables an improvement in the food security status of their families during the lean season, provides an opportunity to earn some extra money, and supports increased production of fodder for sale and for consumption by animals owned by association members.

In general, the production was adequate for the majority of groups; however, unfortunately the cabbage produced by the youth of Monzonga failed due to the hot climate and animals eating the crop. In contrast, the potatoes planted by the group Yiriw were successful. The harvest took place in the presence of the Mercy Corps team, and while not as successful as the production during the normal season, did produce medium-sized potatoes with a good commercial value.

The lesson that the program was able to draw from the initiative of the group is that it is possible to undertake two cycles of potato production during the vegetable



Potato harvest, Groupement Yiriwa, Bazi Haoussa, Ansongo

production season, which goes from October to March, if farmers have access to quality seeds and a water source. This extra cycle of production enables farmers to produce an adequate quantity of potatoes with a strong commercial value at a moment when the price of potatoes on the market is very strong. Unfortunately, the Association Yiriwa decided to sell the majority of their production in Ménaka, in order to take advantage of the very high market price of potatoes during this period. However, during transport to Menaka, the truck rented by the group was attacked by armed groups who looted all of their potatoes. As a result, the group was only able to sell 83 kg of potatoes in Ansongo at a price of 500F per kg.

In Ouatagouna and Bourra, small plots were planted to primarily produce cow pea and okra, as well as onion, lettuce and cabbage by a few groups. These plots are continuing to mature, and the data collection is still underway. In Ansongo, notably in Gomno, the cow pea and okra are growing well, and will be used to produce both seed and fodder, and in Kunabaw, the potatoes are in the beginning of producing tubers.

Additionally, the teams undertook sensitizations with the targeted associations to help them plan for their vegetable campaigns for the upcoming season beginning in October 2016. Groups were assisted to plan their production, and encouraged to put aside funds from the sale of their production in order to purchase seeds for their next campaign.

1.2.3. Rehabilitation of agricultural infrastructure – Food Vouchers for Work

During this quarter, the project undertook Voucher for Work activities with **50** beneficiaries, selected through a participatory community process to target the most vulnerable and food insecure households. Beneficiaries were divided into groups, under the supervision of a monitoring committee. The work consisted primarily of rehabilitating irrigation canals, by reinforcing riders where the canals are completely degraded, closing holes caused by animals and cleaning out the canals.



An attendance sheet was given to each monitoring committee, and the VFW beneficiaries were asked to sign the attendance sheet for each day they worked. Mercy Corps agents were on hand to supervise the work and verify the attendance of participants. A representative of the local agriculture extension service was also regularly present to supervise the work and provide advice on the progress of the activities. In total, 600m of irrigation canals were rehabilitated, and other cleaning up of community land was undertaken.

1.2.4. Revitalize 20 irrigation management committees

No activities to report this quarter.

Sector #2: Economic Recovery & Market Systems

2.1. Support to 150 micro-entrepreneurs

During this quarter, 125 micro-entrepreneurs received training from Mercy Corps, of which 77 were women and 48 men. These participants fell into the following categories:

- 124 previous beneficiaries of Irtoun (77 women and 47 men) who received refresher training and a business-scaling cash grant. These participants were selected based on the following criteria: their business continues to be operational, they have demonstrated their motivation for the activity, they have demonstrated progress in the use of basic management tools, they have not experienced stock outages, they have demonstrated seriousness and determination in their work, the business is growing and they have access to a good site for their business.

- One new beneficiary with a carpentry business.

Following the trainings, the entrepreneurs received cash grants to start or grow their businesses.

During this quarter, Mercy Corps also launched a small pilot project with 10 of the targeted entrepreneurs around the sale of improved cook stoves. Following a market assessment undertaken by Mercy Corps and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which demonstrated a strong demand for this product but no supply in the local market, Mercy Corps decided to undertake a small pilot by sending 100 stoves to Ansongo, to be sold by targeted entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs were able to easily sell the stoves, and to collect all of the payments in a matter of weeks. Mercy Corps is in the process of negotiating with a local wholesaler



Distribution of cash grants in Labezanga (Outagouna Commune)

to explore his interest in importing stoves to Ansongo and selling them to our interested entrepreneurs at a wholesale price. Through this market development approach, Mercy Corps sees potential to develop a market for improved cook stoves, providing a product that provides financial and environmental benefits to consumers, and has the potential to provide a sustainable source of revenue to the targeted entrepreneurs. Support for this activity, in the form of creation of market linkages and facilitation of relationships, will continue over the next period. Entrepreneurs are being supported to reinvest the money they earned through the sale of the stoves in the purchase of another 100 stoves for sale.

2.2. Establish/Strengthen 100 Village Savings and Loans Associations

The VSLA groups and the village agents targeted under this program continue to benefit from the mentoring and assistance of Mercy Corps program assistants. Over the two years of Irtoun, in addition to the 98 VSLA groups established by the Mercy Corps program assistants, the 20 VSLAs supported by the program have established and continue to support 121 additional VSLA groups.

In terms of governance, the supported VSLA groups become more and more mature. During the month of May, the 98 VSLA groups recorded 200 sanctions for members who did not follow the rules, though these sanctions were for minor incidents such as talking during meetings and coming late to meetings. Though minor, this record shows important progress in the application of the bylaws of the associations, for in the beginning of the program these rules were not enforced. Nonetheless, certain groups reported a small number of members who left due a move outside of the intervention area, and a few deaths of members were reported.

Of the 98 VSLAs established by Mercy Corps, 23 practice group income generating projects, including the sale of rice and diverse household products such as condiments, tea, sugar, etc. Together, the 98 VSLAs have accumulated a total credit fund of 13 965 525 FCFA (\$23,670) and a total of 2,339,150 F CFA (\$3,965) in their solidarity fund. During this quarter, 17 VSLA composed of 380 members, preceded to the final share-out of their credit funds. These groups had accrued a total of savings of 5,590,400 FCFA (\$9,475) in their credit funds and reported 813,050 FCFA (\$1,378) in interest generated through loans.

For the 103 VSLA groups established by the village agents and monitored by the Mercy Corps program agents, the groups report a total credit fund of 8,882,250 FCFA (\$15,055) and a total of 1,696,700 FCFA (\$2,876) in their solidarity fund.

5. Monitoring & Evaluation

The principal monitoring and evaluation activity undertaken during this quarter was the final evaluation of the Irtoun program. The evaluation was undertaken during the month of May, and led by the Improve Group. The evaluation consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data collection, and sought both to understand project outcomes in terms of meeting the emergency needs of targeted beneficiaries, as well as to understand the contribution of the project to building resilience of the targeted population. The evaluation produced a number of interesting findings, which are summarized below. The full evaluation report is included in annex.

- The evaluation found that programming was relevant and valuable. Community leaders spoke highly of how well Mercy Corps included and collaborated with communities throughout the entire program process.
- Participants (beneficiaries) improved on all of the (USAID) target food security indicators.
- Mercy Corps most especially helped build social networks, income diversity, and productive assets among participants. These all contribute to resiliency and the ability to cope amid future crises.
- The livestock management program helped women access productive assets and youth to see value in this livelihood. Programming renewed interest and attention to this income-generating activity.
- Agricultural efforts resulted in increased crop yield, diversification of food consumption, and diversification of products to sell. Coupled with other program activities, participants leveraged their knowledge and resources to ensure greater food security for their households.
- Land rehabilitation efforts through the vouchers for work program inspired youth and community members to re-engage with agriculture as a reliable source of income. Vouchers immediately addressed food needs while supporting agricultural economic development. Participants saw immediate results and learned how they could support the land.
- The proliferation of VSLAs in participating villages increased access to a reliable source of credit in case of an emergency. Women in particular used their participation in the VSLA to leverage financing through seed distribution and agricultural production, in turn feeding their families and generating income.
- Entrepreneurial activities increased income diversity and often supported food production to be sold in the market. Some used Mercy Corps grants to jumpstart their stagnant business while others used their skills to effectively manage how much produce to sell versus consume. The focus on women and youth helped them to feel empowered as economic decision-makers and actors in their households and promote their value in the community.
- The current combination of interventions both supports emergency relief as well as catalyzes economic development. The voucher system enabled households to immediately access food. Each of the other programs supported one another such that participants could combine their knowledge and resources to create a successful livelihood.
- Knowledge and practices of income-generating activities are poised to continue beyond Mercy Corps withdrawal. Community leaders and participants report a renewed sense of empowerment in the face of future crises. Certain structures are already in place to help sustain efforts.
- Sustainability of efforts is still tenuous in the event of another major crisis. Despite optimism among communities, local leaders recognize that the current environment is fragile. Some believe that another few years of Mercy Corps involvement would provide the support needed to ensure long term stability

6. Challenges

There were no notable challenges experienced during the quarter, apart from the usual challenges related to insecurity. The armed attack against Irtoun beneficiaries from the association Yiriwa in Bazi Haoussa, during which they lost almost all of their potato harvest, highlights the very real risks within the target area and the devastating consequences for the local population. With the dry season advancing, the population in the target areas are experiencing stressed food security, and the health of

their animals is declining, but the rains have already begun at the time of writing, which will relieve some of this pressure.

7. Conclusion

During the quarter, Mercy Corps teams began to prepare for the end of the program, including informing local authorities, targeted agricultural groups and state authorities that the Irtoun program will be ending. Within the Mercy Corps team, consultations are underway to document best practices and lessons learned in order to inform the Irtoun 2 program, which will build on activities undertaken under Irtoun. Mercy Corps is on track to finalize and close-out all activities under Irtoun by the 30 September.

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